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U.S. Experts Join Probe Of Zia Crash

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, Aug. 21 —A team of American specialists today joined the investigation into the crash of a military plane that killed President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, some of Pakistan's top Army officers and the U.S. ambassador last week.

Embassy officials said the investigation will take many weeks and has been hampered by conflicting accounts from residents near the eastern Pakistan town of Bahawalpur, where Zia's C130 crashed and burned Wednesday.

U.S. officials here have played down assertions by the new interim Pakistani president, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, that the crash was an act of sabotage. [State Department sources in Washington said Sunday that there are increasing indications that the crash was caused by accident rather than by a bomb or other form of sabotage, Washington Post staff writer Don O'Jordorfer reported.]

There has been widespread speculation in the press here that the crash was caused by a bomb planted aboard the plane, perhaps in crates of mangoes that were reported to have been loaded at the last minute as a gift to Zia.

Pakistani officials invited an American team of crash specialists, drawn together by the U.S. Defense Department, to assist in the investigation. Many of the specialists who joined the probe today work for the U.S. government, while others are employed by the Lockheed Corp., which manufactures C130s.

According to preliminary information, embassy officials said it appeared that the pilot was trying to return to the civilian airport at Bahawalpur when the plane crashed.

But reports from witnesses differed on whether the plane exploded in the air or burst into flames when it hit the ground. Witnesses have provided both accounts to Pakistani investigators, U.S. officials said.

While Ishaq Khan, a longtime Pakistani bureaucrat who as Senate chairman was the constitutional successor to Zia as president, said the Pakistani government suspected sabotage, he acknowledged that it had no proof and declined to speculate on who would have wanted to kill Zia.

Senior Pakistani officials familiar with the probe of the crash said investigators were checking six different groups for possible involvement. These sources said a prime suspect was the Afghan secret service Khad, which opposed Zia's support for Afghan guerrillas fighting the Soviet-backed Kabul government.

The sources said those also under investigation were extremist pro-Iranian Shiite Moslems, supporters of five Palestinians sentenced to death in Pakistan for a hijacking, a religious sect Zia had moved against and nationalist groups fighting the Army in Sind province. Investigators have also not ruled out the possible involvement of disgruntled military officers, the sources said.

Also killed in the crash were U.S. ambassador Arnold L. Raphel and brigadier general Herbert Wassom, the head of the military assistance advisory group at the U.S. Embassy. [Secretary of State George P. Bush brought their bodies to the United States on his return Sunday from Zia's funeral in Islamabad.]